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1985/12/06



ASSESSMENTS AND RESEARCH

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(U) CHINESE MILITARY REFORMS: SOCIAL AND
POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Summary/Introduction

Since 1975, Deng Xiaoping has been attempting to implement military reforms that would turn the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a modern and highly professional armed force. The reforms include:

- modernizing strategic thinking;
- streamlining and reorganizing the armed forces;
- establishing combined forces tactical units;
- retiring aged and incompetent leaders;
- raising the educational and technical quality of troops and officers; and
- improving military training and maneuvers.

The changes being made will have significant long-term social and political implications.

Progress in military reform at first was very slow, but significant results have been obtained in many areas during the last year or two. During this period, the PLA has retired thousands of superannuated officers and announced plans for demobilizing as much as one-fourth of its troops. The command structure has been reorganized and streamlined from the center to the local garrison.

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Report 1205-AR
December 6, 1985

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The contours of Chinese military reform are now fairly well known. Less thoroughly considered, however, are some of the political and social implications. In many cases the reforms are in their infancy, but it is possible nonetheless to discern their potential ramifications.

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Changing Strategy and Professionalization

As China moves from a strategy of "People's War" to one aimed at confronting a Soviet invasion with an effective conventional response at or near the border, the PLA is likely to become increasingly differentiated from the local populace.

The regular PLA will soon be smaller and more professional. Professionalization suggests greater autonomy in establishing norms of behavior, criteria for promotion, and systems of reward, as well as greater differentiation between members and non-members and a clearer definition of what sorts of activity fall within, and outside, the profession. Although some PLA units, especially engineering and construction units, may continue to support social and economic activity (much as the Corps of Engineers and the National Guard do in the US), past blurring of military and non-military functions, already on the wane, will likely be further reduced.

The day when the PLA is capable of stopping a conventional Soviet attack near the border, however, is a long way off. The current intermediate development in strategic thinking combines elements of the traditional approach of "luring in deep"--although not so deep as before--with an effective conventional response before vital industrial and population centers are reached. In the interim, the PLA will continue to rely on militia (along with paramilitary border defense forces) for border defense, but will increasingly make use of a ready reserve system, now being organized. More extensive training and better equipment will call for greater coordination between PLA main-force units and reserves than previously existed between PLA and militia, and for extensive reorganization of the mobilization, logistics, C3 (command, control, and communications), and training systems.

Similarly, the imperatives of vastly more sophisticated and demanding training--in combined arms and combined forces activities, for example--will reduce the time available for the PLA's traditional ties with the local populace and involvement in "non-military" activities. This may give rise to irritations between armed forces posts and their surrounding communities. Signs of significant civilian-military strain continue to be evident in PLA General Political Department announcements, and such problems may become worse.

Civil-Military Economic Interaction

By contrast, evidence suggests that civilian and military industries--and economies, more broadly--are becoming more

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integrated. Efforts to redirect some military industrial production to dual-use or civilian production appear to have met with some success. In addition, the military's monopoly over China's most advanced technology seems to be breaking down. Under current reforms in the civilian economy, high technology is increasingly being acquired from abroad in such key industries as electronics and machine building by civilian factories. As a result, the pattern may become increasingly one of technology transfer from the civilian to the military side rather than the reverse.

Greater integration of civilian-military industries may be accompanied by a blurring of lines in such areas as procurement, transport, and supply. Available evidence suggests that the General Logistics Department, for example, will divest itself of a significant portion of its storage and transport assets and will rely on better central control and closer liaison with civilian components and local officials.

The Changing Social Base of the PLA

Changes in recruitment, training, education, tactics, and equipment appear likely over the long run to transform the PLA from a largely peasant-based military into an urban-based, better educated, and more technically oriented establishment. This development will likely have two opposite effects: New recruits will probably be better able to operate effectively in the increasingly complex and technical environment of modern war; but they will likely be less hardy physically, less malleable and harder to discipline, and more demanding of higher pay. Increasing opportunities for upward mobility through other channels have made it more difficult for the PLA to recruit, even in the countryside, forcing a recent tightening of conscription procedures.

Social Effects of Massive Demobilization

The effects of the PLA's announced intention to reduce its size by 1 million persons are likely to be mixed. Plans for the reduction in force have created widespread anxiety both within the PLA and in society as a whole. PLA members are afraid for their future, while local governments fear that large numbers of ill-prepared, undereducated, often elderly troops will be let loose on a local economy already pressed to find meaningful employment for local citizens. Traditional areas of employment for demobilized PLA cadres, such as commune and brigade officials, are shrinking or are less prestigious than they used to be.

At the same time, evidence suggests that demobilized PLA troops generally appear to do rather well under current reform policies. They often are better educated than the locals, more worldly, and in possession of certain bureaucratic and technical

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skills in short supply. A disproportionate number of specialized households and persons in tertiary industries appear to be demobilized PLA troops and cadres.

Changes in Social Relations Within the PLA

Status Differentiation Reemerging. Current plans appear to envision the establishment of much clearer distinctions between an officer corps, a reestablished non-commissioned officer corps, and the enlisted troops. The prevailing relations between officers--most of whom rose from the ranks--and enlisted troops will change significantly. Most jobs performed by NCOs in a Western army are currently done by low-level officers in the PLA, resulting in a very top-heavy military. Plans now call for the downgrading to NCO status of 76 types of military positions held by officers, including repair technicians, radio station chiefs, film projection team leaders, company quartermasters, laboratory personnel, and confidential clerks. Moreover, with promotions increasingly based on educational, training, technical, and performance criteria rather than seniority or revolutionary credentials, career patterns and career advancement strategies probably will change significantly.

The PLA is currently also implementing an "up-or-out" system of promotion. This change will dramatically affect career paths for officers, create a true career for NCOs, and widen the opportunities for enlisted troops. Rotational patterns may eventually emerge, especially for officers and NCOs, based on limited tours of duty in a given unit before reposting, perhaps even to another job, much as is the case for Western military personnel.

Basic Training. Indicative of the kind of reform going on, and of its potentially widespread social implications, is the change under way in the system of basic military training. Formerly, each year's recruits were inducted more or less directly into existing platoons and companies, forcing low-level commanders to serve as drill instructors and limiting training and exercises to a yearly schedule progressing from the most basic to, at best, the intermediate level. A move is now under way to establish recruit depots and basic training facilities at the regional level, allowing companies and higher units to engage in more advanced training, up to and including combined arms and combined forces exercises.

Aside from the obvious military benefits of such a move, the social implications are potentially far-reaching. Rather than nestling into a local unit not far from home, where everyone speaks the local dialect and has primary loyalty to the local commander, recruits now will experience "boot camp" with a wider social group and will develop loyalties to a larger segment of the

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PLA. This process will be reinforced by greater uniformity of training and education for officers as they attend higher military schools to achieve promotion.

Changes in the PLA's Political Role

Military Centralization. The PLA, in contrast to most elements of the civilian sector, is undergoing a process of centralization. In the last few years, formerly "independent" service arms--such as the artillery, armored, ABC (atomic, biological, and chemical warfare), signal, and anti-aircraft forces--have been put under the direct command of the General Staff Department. Similarly, the GSD has tightened its control over the Military Regions.

Mirroring this centralization at the national level has been a centralization of control at the regional level. To advance this effort, China's military regions have been reduced from 11 to 7. Chains of command are clearer and better enforced. The role of the military district appears to be reduced to that of coordinator of reserve and militia forces, not unlike the US National Guard and Reserve systems. Efforts to establish combined arms units further extend the centralization of control to the tactical level.

Role in Policy. Over the last decade, the Chinese leadership, under Deng Xiaoping's guidance, has reduced the PLA's influence over general policy, cutting its representation on the Central Committee in 1985 to a post-Cultural Revolution low of 16 percent and its representation on the Politburo even more drastically. At the same time, however, the PLA's role may become increasingly important on issues of direct military relevance. Deng and members of his generation served as military commanders during World War II and the Civil War and have a good grasp of the PLA's traditional structure and requirements. As those requirements change with modernization, however, a new generation will be taking over, represented by men like Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang who have limited, if any, military experience. Future Chinese leaders are likely to find that military leaders can argue persuasively on issues too technically complex for the uninitiated and too important for error.

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